

**Election Access Survey**  
**Bay State Council of the Blind**  
**April 2021**

## Introduction

In 2020, in the midst of a world-wide pandemic, the Massachusetts Bay State Council of the Blind (BSCB) successfully advocated with other disability organizations to ensure that the expansion of voting options would allow a person with a disability to be safe and to vote privately, independently and with verification of one's vote. On July 6th, the Massachusetts legislature passed a law expanding voting options. The law opened the absentee ballot system allowing anyone to request a mail in ballot. For the first time, it provided for an accessible electronic vote by mail ballot option for people with disabilities.

Since the implementation of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), the AutoMark terminal is the primary method for accessible voting in Massachusetts. With the addition of the electronic vote by mail ballot option, BSCB wanted to understand the voting experiences of people who are blind and low vision.

## Methodology

The survey was distributed via email and sent in Massachusetts primarily to organizations serving people who are blind and low vision. The survey was developed by members of the BSCB legislative Committee. The survey had fourteen questions and was administered via Google forms. Anyone who was unable to use Google forms had the option to call BSCB and was able to get assistance to complete the survey.

The data gathered is a snapshot of the respondents voting experiences. A respondent had to answer all of the questions in order to complete and to submit the survey. There was no random sampling done and the data is not statistically valid.

A total of forty-seven individuals completed the survey. All of the respondents voted in the November 2020 Presidential election.

### Data Summary

100% of the respondents voted.

89.4% of respondents answered that they did know about the electronic voting option.

Knowledge of the electronic Voting Option	Respondents	Percentage
Yes	42	89%
No	5	11%

A similar percentage of respondents, 30% of respondents voted early in-person and voted using an absentee ballot. 19% of respondents used the electronic ballot option to vote.

Cast ballot	Responses	Percentage
Voted early in-person	14	30%
Voted by absentee ballot	14	30%
Voted electronic ballot	9	19%

75% of individuals answered that they had a printer and were able to use it independently.

Printer	Respondents	Percentage
Yes	35	75%
No	12	25%

53% of respondents said that there was an AutoMark machine at their polling site and 17% answered that they did not know if there was an AutoMark machine at their polling site.

AutoMark machine at polling site	Respondents	Percentage
Yes	25	53%
Don't know	8	17%
NA	14	30%

68% of individuals said they were able to use the voting option they preferred and 32% said they were not able to use the voting option they preferred.

Use preferred voting option	Responses	Percentages
Yes	32	68%
No	15	32%

The majority of respondents 72% did not use the electronic ballot option. Of those who did, 17% rated the process of requesting the ballot as Difficult. 4% rated the process as Neither Difficult or Easy and 4% rated the process as Easy.

Process of requesting an electronic ballot	Respondents	Percentage
Difficult	8	17%
Neither difficult or easy	2	4%
Easy	2	4%

17% rated the process of choosing and confirming their selections as Easy.6% said answered it was Somewhat Easy.

Chose and Confirm Selection	Respondents	Percentages
Easy	8	17%
Somewhat easy	3	6%

There were some respondents who started the electronic ballot process but did not cast their vote using this option. As a result, 9% rated the process of returning their completed electronic ballot Easy and 6% rated the process Neither Difficult or Easy.

Process of returning to the Secretary of the Commonwealth's office	Respondents	Percentages
Easy	8	9%
Neither difficult or easy	3	6%

There were five open ended questions. The aim was to provide opportunities for the respondents to further describe their experiences of voting.

Respondents took full advantage of all of the options which were available to vote

## **Reason for selecting voting option**

### **Early Voting**

- Wanted to get it done early
- Concerned that signature wouldn't match if used absentee ballot
- Like voting in-person
- Wanted to vote independently and privately
- Did not trust mail in ballot; concerned that ballot would be thrown away and not counted

### **Election Day**

- Did not trust any other method
- Polling site not crowded
- New electronic option seemed like a hassle
- Ill during early voting period
- Made error on absentee ballot
- Believe it is important that we are seen at the polls with our guide dogs and canes

### **Absentee mail in ballot**

- Used and got help to place in drop box
- Felt safer staying away from crowds at the polling site

### **Electronic ballot option**

- Wanted to vote independently with no help from family

- Wanted to try new option
- Concerned about health and going to the polling site
- Concerned that mail in ballot would not be received in time and counted
- Able to vote from home
- Wanted to show that it can be done and is needed

### **Experience with the AutoMark machine**

Even though the majority of respondents reported their experience of using the AutoMark machine as Fine, Easy, Able to vote independently, some problems were expressed.

- Not in private space and had to turn screen off
- Told that it would take 20 – 40 minutes for the machine to work
- Had to rely on a poll worker because the machine wasn't working
- Machine broke in the middle of voting
- Machine printer malfunctioned

### **Reasons for using voting method**

Although everyone who responded voted, some people were not able to use the voting method they preferred.

- Concerned that signature would not match if used the absentee ballot
- AutoMark machine not working and had to rely on a poll worker
- Wanted to avoid crowds and Covid, prefer to vote in-person

- Preferred the electronic ballot option but could not get anyone to answer the phone
- Found the process for requesting the electronic ballot confusing
- Local election office did not know about the electronic ballot option and requested absentee ballot
- Did not hear about the electronic ballot in-time to make the request

### **Actions to Improve Accessibility**

In responding to the question of actions which can be taken to ensure accessibility, many ideas were shared.

#### **AutoMark machine**

- Make sure poll workers are trained on the AutoMark machine
- Place the AutoMark machine in a more private space
- Make sure the AutoMark machine is tested even before the polls open
- More advertisement about the AutoMark machine because can help people with disabilities and elders

#### **Electronic Voting Option**

- Simplify the process for requesting the electronic ballot option
- Make sure that local election offices know about the electronic voting option
- Make the form to request the electronic voting option accessible
- Better and earlier communication about the availability of the electronic voting option
- Trainings for voters on how to use the electronic voting option
- Make sure that the electronic ballot looks like everyone's ballot so that in small towns no one can identify an individual's ballot



- Electronic ballot manufacturer should provide information on how to create the PDF needed to submit the ballot
- More advertisement about the availability of the electronic voting option

## **Conclusion**

In 2020 the Bay State Council of the Blind aimed to gather information on the experience of its members use of the voting options. Responses showed that respondents took full advantage of all of the voting options available. Yet, moving forward there is a desire to have the available accessible options function better.

For many years, the AutoMark machine has been the only accessible option with persistent challenges of machines not working and poll workers not knowing how the machine operates. Yet, when there was another option, many respondents expressed interest in using the electronic voting option. There are actions which must be taken to increase awareness of the electronic ballot and to improve the process of accessing and using the electronic ballot. BSCB working with other disability organizations and the Secretary of the Commonwealth's office can ensure that all options to vote are available and accessible.

## Appendix A Survey

BSCB request feedback of your experience of access to the November 3 election in Massachusetts.

Your answers are confidential and will be summarized. The final report will help BSCB to identify and to prioritize its future advocacy efforts and will be shared with the Disability Law Center and the elections Division of the Secretary of the Commonwealth.

Note: In order to submit your responses, you must answer each question. If a question does not describe you, please select or write in (N/A).

Thank you for taking the survey.

1. Did you vote in the November 3 election?

Yes/No

2. Please select all responses which describe you, if you did not vote

N/A

Did not register to vote

Health concerns because of Covid 19

No transportation to the poll

No one to accompany me to the poll

Did not know how to vote

Did not know where to vote

Did not know that there were accessible voting options

Other

3. Did you know about the electronic vote by mail ballot?

Yes, No

4. How did you cast your ballot?

Voted in person on Election Day

Voted early in person

Voted by paper absentee ballot

Voted online, printed ballot and mailed it back

Voted online, printed ballot and placed in ballot drop box

Voted online and returned it by email to the Secretary of the Commonwealth

N/A

Other: edit

5. Do you have a printer which you are able to use by yourself?

Yes no

6. Why did you choose to vote using your selected method?

7. Was there an AutoMark voting terminal at your polling site?

Yes no don't know n/A

8. How would you describe your experience of using the AutoMark terminal?

9. If you marked your ballot using the electronic vote by mail ballot, how would you rate the process to request your ballot?

5 Easy

4 Somewhat easy

3 Neither easy or difficult

2 Difficult

1 Very difficult

10. If you marked your ballot using the electronic vote by mail ballot, how would you rate the process of choosing and confirming your selections?

5 Easy

4 Somewhat easy

3 Neither easy or difficult

2 Difficult

1 Very difficult

11. If you marked your ballot using the Electronic Vote by Mail Ballot, how would you rate the process of submitting your electronic ballot to the Secretary of the Commonwealth?

5 Easy

4 Somewhat easy

3 Neither easy or difficult

2 Difficult

1 Very difficult

12. Were you able to use the voting option you preferred?  
Yes no, N/A

13. Please describe why you were not able to use the voting option you preferred?

14. How could accessible voting be improved in future elections?